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The Bodily Gestures of the *Ṣalāt*

Muslim authors who explain the significance of the *ṣalāt* presuppose a thorough grounding in Islamic practice. They address people who perform the *ṣalāt* every day and for whom it has become second nature. They discuss the meaning of the gestures rather rarely, and only in the context of what is known as “the mysteries of the acts of worship” (*asrār al-‘ibādāt*).¹ Authors of such works are typically Sufis, which is to say that they belong to that body of Muslims who are not satisfied with superficial interpretations and who stress meaning over form. These works, however, devote far more attention to explaining the significance of the various formulae and Koranic verses that are recited than to the gestures themselves. Part of the reason for this relative reticence is no doubt that the body assimilates the wisdom of the gestures, thereby making verbalization unnecessary. After all, the resurrection is bodily, and the Koran tells us that each of the bodily parts will be questioned about its activities in the world.

The Prophet called *ṣalāt* the “centerpole” of the religion. As the centerpole of the religion, the *ṣalāt* holds up the rest of Islam and expresses the most essential act that God wants from human beings. If the Shahadah is the oral acknowledgment of surrender to God’s love and mercy, the *ṣalāt* adds the bodily activity most recommended by God.

The meaning of the *ṣalāt* can be approached from many directions. Perhaps the best way to gain insight into its movements is to situate them within the context of Islamic teachings on the human microcosm. These teachings differentiate clearly between the lower, dark, dense, unconscious, and dispersed dimension of the human being, called the “body” (*jism*), and the higher, luminous, subtle, conscious, and unified dimension, called the “spirit” (*rūh*). The body is the corporeal image of God, while the spirit is God’s breath, blown into the body when God “shaped the clay” of the human being. There is one fundamental spirit (God’s breath) and a great number of human bodies, all made in God’s image. In each individual, spirit and body intermingle on an intermediary level—an “isthmus” (*barzakh*)—called the “soul.”²

The soul represents the encounter between the qualities of spirit and body. It is the locus of awareness and personality, but it is neither purely spiritual nor purely corporeal. Within the soul, light comes together with darkness, knowledge with ignorance, unity with multiplicity, remembrance with forgetfulness, life with death, power with weakness. Through the soul, spirit and body interact, and this interaction becomes manifest as changes are undergone, moment by moment, in thought, speech, and movement. The goal of human existence in this world is to integrate the lower into the higher, the corporeal into the spiritual, the human into the Divine. Hence, a Muslim strives to entrust his body to his soul and his soul to his spirit. But this depends on establishing a firm relationship with the divine center and tying all the dispersed activity of the body and soul back into God.

The *ṣalāt* engages people on every level of their existence. The gestures provide the model for bodily activity integrated into the Real. Like the human being, the *ṣalāt* has three fundamental dimensions. Its spirit is mindfulness or “presence of the heart” (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*). In every prayer the Muslim strives to root the heart firmly in the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. The fact that a person performs the prayer is proof of a minimal mindfulness, just as the fact of human life is proof of the presence of the spirit. But full presence of the heart in prayer is as rare as human self-awareness situated at the level of the Divine Spirit. Such awareness is the goal of human existence, and only the prophets and the greatest friends of God (*awliyā*) experience it.

Each gesture is accompanied by certain Koranic verses or prophetic formulae that provide the key to its significance. The verses or sayings bridge the gap between the spirit and body of the prayer, between mindfulness and bodily activity. They are like an isthmus between the prayer’s spirit and body. They are the “soul” of the prayer, bringing together the luminosity of the prayer’s spirit with the corporeality of its form. Thus, the words have an articulated, bodily nature like the gestures, but their ultimate meaning transcends all forms.

Among the many texts that the authorities quote to bring out the significance of the *ṣalāt* is the prophetic saying, “The *ṣalāt* is the *mi’rāj* of the believer [*al-ṣalāt mi’rāj al-mu’min*].” The *mi’rāj* is the Prophet’s “ascension” whereby he was taken through the heavens into the Divine Presence. The word *mi’rāj* literally means “tool for climbing,” or “ladder.” One climbs up on a ladder, but one also comes back down on the ladder. The significance of the *mi’rāj* lies not only in the Prophet’s ascent, but also in his return to the world. These two movements mark the two main stages of spiritual perfection and are reflected in the *ṣalāt*’s structure.

According to the generally accepted doctrine, the Prophet’s *mi’rāj* was bodily. Human perfection, in other words, is not confined to the invisible, luminous, and spiritual dimension of being. It also pertains to the visible, dark, and corporeal dimension, since the divine image manifests certain attributes that demand corporeal form. The body is an essential component in the quest for God. Like the soul, it undergoes transformations appropriate to its own level.

The *ṣalāt* has four main positions: standing straight; bowing so that one's back and head are parallel with the ground; prostrating oneself by putting the knees, hands, and forehead on the ground; and sitting with knees forward and back straight. Each mandatory *ṣalāt* is made up of two, three, or four cycles. One cycle consists of standing, bowing, standing again, prostrating oneself, coming up to a sitting position, prostrating oneself once again, and then coming up to a standing or a sitting position, depending on which cycle is being performed.

In the first part of each cycle the person stands with the hands either at the side or folded across the stomach (depending on one's juridical school). God has commanded people to assume the responsibility of the human state, and they reply by standing before Him as servants. The meaning of the standing comes out clearly when it is contrasted with the next two positions: bowing and prostrating oneself. Bowing, Ibn al-'Arabī remarks, is an isthmus between standing and prostrating.³ It is highly significant that the Koran employs the verb "to prostrate oneself" most often in the story of the angels prostrating themselves before Adam at God's command, and the refusal of Satan to do the same. Prostration before God is an acknowledgement of His supreme authority. The person expresses in body and soul utter surrender (*islām*) to God's command. Satan incarnates the self-willed and obstinate refusal to accept God's guidance. His motto is "*I am better than he*" (38:76). Seeing Adam as less than himself, Satan did not consider him worthy of prostration. The servant who refuses to prostrate himself before God is saying, "I am better than He."

In the standing position, the servant shares in a divine attribute, since God is *the Living, the Ever-Standing* (2:255). But both the bowing and the prostrating are attributes of the servant, not of the Lord. These two positions share in signifying submissiveness, humbleness, lowliness, and reverential fear (*khuḍū*). As Ibn al-'Arabī points out, through the prostration, the servant seeks his own origin, which is clay, while through the standing he seeks to return to the root of his positive qualities, which is spirit. Clay is made from water and earth and possesses by right such qualities as lowliness, darkness, density, heaviness, dullness, passivity, ignorance, and death. The spirit is the divine breath, one in substance with the angels. Its inherent qualities include elevation, luminosity, subtlety, lightness, brightness, activity, knowledge, and life. The standing displays one's spiritual nature, the prostration one's bodily nature, and the bowing the intermediate domain of the soul. The three gestures taken together express the servanthood of the total human being.

Although the spirit is high and luminous in relation to the body, it is low and dark in relation to God. Having stood through the spirit, the servant then bows to acknowledge that everything positive in the spirit derives from God. Bowing shows that the servant rejects the thought, "I am better than He," because he knows that whatever he possesses was given to him by his Lord. He rejects the claim to independence that the soul is tempted to make when it finds itself irradiated by the spirit's light and imagines that the light belongs to itself. Among the words that are often recited during the bowing is the sentence, "My

hearing, my sight, my brain, my bones, and my nerves have humbled themselves before You.” Each of these organs and faculties possesses certain divine qualities that allow the human person to exist, and each will be questioned on the Day of Resurrection.⁴ The bowing indicates that the servant gives up all claims to these qualities by recognizing their rootedness in God.

The prostration, then, marks the point where the servant returns to that which belongs to himself, which is clay. Hence, the Sufi authorities maintain that prostration is the outward sign of one of the highest stages of perfection. It is the servant’s recognition and experience of his own nothingness. It is his annihilation (*fanā*) in the light of God.

The *ṣalāt* ends in a seated position, which expresses stability in an intermediate stage. Here the servant asks God to bless Muhammad, “Your servant and Your messenger.” The sitting position combines the elevation of spirit and messengerhood—acting as God’s representative in the world—and the lowliness of body and servanthood. It is the return from the *mi’rāj*, signifying the full actualization of the divine image. It is to subsist in God’s attributes after having given up all of one’s own attributes. It illustrates the meaning of the Koranic verse, *All that dwells upon the earth is annihilated, and there subsists only the face of your Lord, the Possessor of Majesty and Generosity* (55:26–27).